

Sunday 1 September 2024
Choral Evensong

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 12.21-27
NT: Matthew 4.23 - 5.20

We heard in this evening's New Testament reading portions of what is variously called the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel, or in St Luke's gospel the sermon on the plain! No one has fully explained the difference; obviously the geography of Galilee is more complicated than we thought! But what most people agree about is that this series of teachings, beginning with the beatitudes which we heard, is a kind of anthology of Jesus' teaching put together as one great sequence as if it were one sermon. This you might say is the essential Jesus of Nazareth, what Jesus most wants to say, what he's most eager to communicate to us. But, over the centuries, people have rather misunderstood what this is about. Quite often you hear people saying, 'I admire Christian morality', or 'I like the sermon on the Mount, it's only the doctrine I can't be doing with'. But the question is 'is the sermon on the mount meant to be about morality at all?'. Are the beatitudes, these 'blessed' sayings meant to be recommendations of good behaviour? It's not obvious, is it?

'Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, you who weep, and blessed are you when people hate you'. So, does being a good Christian mean that we must go out and be poor, hungry, tearful and obnoxious? Presumably that is not quite the point. But sadly, when people have said the morality of the sermon on the mount is wonderful, what they often mean is just a vague idea that Jesus tells us to love our neighbours without too much content to it. In fact, something much more complex and much more interesting is going on here. It's also something to think about when we welcome new baptised members of the Church.

The word 'blessed' is key here. What Jesus is doing in these words opening the great sermon is to say, 'I am going to show you who the kind of people are, around whom you might experience God'. Who are the sorts of people you might see God close to? And – Jesus never less than shocking – the people you might expect to see in the neighbourhood of God or the people whose neighbourhood you might expect God to turn up are not the ones you expected. They are not the ones who are on top of circumstances. They are not the ones who are in control. They are not the rich, the replete, the laughing and the popular. People like that, as he says, have their reward. They are doing very nicely (thank you) in the world as it is, because they are confident that they are in charge. They have the resources to keep themselves secure. But, says Jesus, the people in whose neighbourhood God tends to turn up are just not the people who think that they are in charge. Think of the poor, think of the hungry, think of those who are coping with loss. Think of those who are

at odds with the world they are in. And Matthew's version here goes on...think of the peacemakers; think of the single minded who pursue a vision, people who feel that the way they behave is constrained. They can't just do what suits them; they must find a way forward that is somehow in tune with the mysterious reality that impresses itself on them. However, they are anything but in charge of the situation. And Jesus is quite clear in both Matthew and Luke that those who are poor and hungry, those are peacemakers, who pursue single mindedly the vision that God has given them, are not overall going to be the people who win elections and write editorials in newspapers and control major multinational companies. Nonetheless, be ready to see God in their neighbourhood.

Why is that? It's not that Jesus is saying that it won't do to be successful or happy. And certainly, won't do to claim that Christian ethics is all about making yourself unsuccessful and unhappy, although there are Christians who had a good go at doing that. It's rather that there is a kind of human experience which uncovers for us the fact that we can't cope on our own; we can't manage on our own terms. We can't organise the world as we'd like it. Whether we like it or not, we are responding, reacting, depending; we need feeding and loving. And so, those moments that uncover for us our need, the need to be loved, to be fed and to belong, those are the moments when we discover something fundamental about who we are as human beings.

That is the point: we as human beings constantly try to delude ourselves that one little further push and we can be in charge. We will really have arrived. Nothing is going to shock us or change us. That is the 'ideal' where we would like to be. Jesus says: 'actually, no!'. Because the more you think that you are in charge, the less that you are in touch with your humanity, that hungry, struggling, mourning humanity, that vulnerable humanity at the heart of every one of us, the core that needs to be fed and loved.... lose touch with that and you lose touch with your humanity. That is why those who are rich and poor and laughing and popular are at deepest risk of losing touch with their humanity. When you lose touch with your humanity, you lose touch with God. There is the big new thing that Jesus is saying to us. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, unsurprisingly tells us that the more human we get, the closer we get to God and the more God is God in blazing love and mercy and generosity, the closer God comes to humanity.

What's all this got to do with our first reading in Exodus, then, where we were reminded of what the Passover means. The Israelites were spared when the angel of death slaughtered all the firstborn of Egypt as a prelude to the release of the slaves. Is the God we have in the New Testament, the same God who can be held responsible for the killing of innocent men, women, and children because of their race, as the story might imply? No one can know what memory or tradition lies behind this story, but we get it wrong if we assume that this

reveals in God an arbitrary and bloodthirsty element. The scholars have always recognised the problem. The story tells us that liberation comes at a price. For the slave owner, losing what he owns feels like the worst possible assault on who he is. The point is that God's justice is for him too. As long as he is a slave owner, he is not free either. In a not very well-known passage, St Augustine of Hippo captures the heart of it: the soul of the tyrant, he says, is destroyed by his tyranny just as much as the body of those over whom he tyrannises. The tyrant is liberated by whatever stops him being a tyrant. It will wrench his very being. Here, the inflexibility of God cannot make it easy. The darkness of the Passover night is what both oppressor and oppressed have to live through if they are to be in the company of the liberating God. He cannot be less than he is.

And so, here we are gathered together as 'the holy people' (no pressure), wanting to be fed. We know that the drama is here because we know that restoration to all the mess of our world comes with upheaval and pain. For us to be changed and liberated in new relationships with God and each other, for justice to be done, there is no avoiding cost. We come here to be fed with the Body and Blood of Christ. We are here to be human, if you like! When we worship, we are getting in touch with our humanity, to be changed, enlarged and enriched when we acknowledge our need. We receive the life of Jesus so that it may become our life as well, be fed with that vision of God and God's world and that generosity of heart which belongs to Jesus. Whether we are baptised, or to be baptised or those of us who are not quite sure where they stand in the spectrum of things, the message is the same to all of us: be in touch with the humanity that needs feeding and loving, be honest about our vulnerability, our weakness and our need.

Fr Yazid Said